

**Msunduzi Community Network
(Phase 1)**

EVALUATION REPORT

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1. Introduction

The Msunduzi Community Network Project (Phase 1), a partnership between the Greater Edendale Environmental Network (GREEN) and the Institute of Natural Resources (INR), was implemented in Pietermaritzburg over a period of 18 months between the beginning of 1998 and mid-1999. It was initially called The Msunduzi River Catchment Community Based Environment and Development Information and Communication Network.

The project grew out of a growing perception that environmental and developmental initiatives in and around Pietermaritzburg would be significantly strengthened by enhancing the information and communication capabilities of the community based organizations associated with GREEN.

1.1 Project Objectives

The objectives of the project center on *improving* access to information (for organizations and community's), decision making and action responses through the establishment of functional 'hubs' equipped with ICT's (the network).

In particular, the project specifies the following objectives as requirements:

- Establishing GREEN as a central node for the network;
- Expanding the network from three to eight hubs;
- Ensuring the requisite training for hubs to function effectively;
- Endeavor to use the network to the advantage of the community at large (through partnerships with formal and informal stakeholders and 'representatives')
- Developing an effective community-based electronic 'information and communication' model.

2. Evaluation methodology

Phase 1 of the project is complete, and Phase 2 underway. No systematic evaluation framework has been operational thus far, although a review of Phase 1 has been conducted.

The evaluation is of a project which has been supported by the ACACIA program within IDRC, a program promoting the use of information and communication technologies for development. The project has located itself within the ACACIA program approach which seeks to test particular methodologies or approaches which themselves feed into a search for national strategies.

This evaluation will also feed into the ELSA program, the specific learning arm of ACACIA, which seeks to build a platform for knowledge sharing based on the many ICT development initiatives supported by ACACIA.

The evaluation is summative, although with Phase 2 up and running it must contribute to the approach GREEN adopts to its current implementation, and this necessitates a consultative process that is as comprehensive as possible.

The terms of reference for this evaluation stipulate a qualitative approach to assessing the outputs and impact of the project. Information gathering was undertaken through face-to-face interviews (usually in groups), observation, and a study of documents made available on request.

Without exception, full co-operation from everyone associated with the project was forthcoming.

In terms of process, the interviews began with the staff of GREEN itself, then with INR, and then with the hubs. Further meetings with GREEN and INR followed, with another round of visits to the hubs. Stakeholders were contacted along the way as their

connection to the project became apparent. Independently, interviews took place with GREEN and INR staff around training and the communication aspects of the project (the website and the newsletters). Very little documentary evidence from the hub organizations has been forthcoming, although the reports compiled by GREEN itself have been valuable, and attest to a reasonable flow of information amongst participants, and to the veracity of the information gathered in other ways.

One of the central issues to emerge in the course of the evaluation, which has a direct bearing on the evaluation itself, is that of the organizational integrity of the groups responsible for the hubs. Inasmuch as the evaluation was primarily focused on the project as executed by GREEN and INR, the limits on exploring the organizations themselves were not clear, and we were reluctant to impose ourselves too firmly in this terrain. It became obvious that the strengths and weaknesses of these organizations had a direct bearing on the project, but the project itself does not really extend to the organizational aspects of them. The overwhelming impression that we have of these organizations is the significant impact the network has had on the infrastructure of these organizations, although how they have responded to these facilities varies from hub to hub.

A further issue with regard to an evaluation methodology, which is linked to the above, is the matter of perspective. As will become clear below, the objectives of the project have been met, but interrogating the process with a view to learning is colored by the time that has passed since the end of the project and the beginning of Phase 2. In an effort to trace the development of the network, and the impact it had on the various organizations making up the network, we have had to rely on a mix of memory and observation of current practices. On the whole, people have been reluctant to limit their own understandings of the project to that earlier time frame (the eighteen months from early 1998 to the middle of 1999), and many of the problems and achievements which relate to that time frame are encapsulated in current organizational thinking and activities.

3. Organizational issues

While Phase 1 of the project set itself a number of goals, the specific issue of developing an organizational infrastructure was not dealt with in any detail. However, it is clear from the work done in the course of the evaluation that organizational issues have played a crucial role in the network, and impacted significantly on the extent to which hubs have become integrated into community activities. This in turn has effected the information and communication components of the project.

3.1 Lead organizations

It must be noted at the outset that this partnership brought together two very different kinds of organizations.

3.1.1 The Greater Edendale Environmental Network

As a network of organizations, GREEN exists as a permanent secretariat, with numerous community-based affiliates. Prior to the project under review, it was simply a group of dedicated volunteers who performed an integrating function across the broad field of environmental groups and issues. It is only when the project started that any real institutional framework was created. Throughout its existence, GREEN has been under the direction of Sandile Ndawonde, who became the project manager of Phase 1, along with Duncan Hay of the INR.

By its very nature then, the project was the beginning of a process of consolidation and change in the nature of both GREEN itself, and the organizations with which it sought to develop the project. Phase 1 is thus less the creation of a network, than the

institutionalization of a set of relationships which had existed for some time, and which were born of voluntary activism in the field of environmental problems facing the Black communities in and around Pietermaritzburg.

GREEN has had to play a difficult role: not only has it the responsibility of ensuring an organizationally coherent set of practices (which implies authority), but it has also been responsible for the social economy of the network: continuing the relationship building begun before the project began, and maintaining good human relations amongst participants (when in reality, it had no authority).

3.1.2 The Institute of Natural Resources

The INR is a professional research and facilitation organization, and owes its existence to securing contracts in the broad field of development. While a number of INR staff have been involved in the project, Duncan Hay has been the central figure. His overall impression of Phase 1 is of institution building across the network (administrative systems, computer skilling, report/proposal writing and so on). His ability to marshall the training expertise and provide institutional support through his own network of contacts and service providers is reflected in his understanding of the significant achievements of Phase 1.

3.2 The social economy of the network

Looking at the network of hubs today (well into Phase 2 of the project) provides us with a framework with which to consider the social economy of the network. While Phase 1 was the implementation of an electronic network, this was built on informal contacts which were molded into a form of organization, not in a formal sense, with a range of organizational requirements for functioning: administration, financial management, learning (through training) and the sharing of information through the use of the technology. This required a form of surveillance and monitoring whose success was reliant on the informal 'togetherness' of a group of individuals.

Transforming a group of activists into a structure without rules is a complicated process, and one which remains in process today. The role of INR in this process has been negligible, by virtue of the fact that Duncan Hay acted as a facilitator in bringing the project into existence, but played no role in its social economy. The fact is, not all the hubs are in the hands of those initially part of the project, and GREEN (and Sandile Ndawonde in particular) has had to maintain an organization without rules at the same time as the informal network has changed. The Sobantu Environmental Desk, the Woodlands Environmental Forum and the Willowfontein Youth Development Forum have retained people who were part of the initial project, but the Vulindlela and Georgetown hubs are now 'manned' by new recruits to their own respective organizations.

The GREEN network is central to the broader network of CBO's and NGO's in Pietermaritzburg encompassing as it does the environmental groups (such as EJNF, Earthlife and the Agenda 21 group) and others, such as HIV/AIDS groups. Brian Bassett, the City Planner views GREEN as one of the most important groups "interfacing with the community", and "one of the most trustworthy groups in the PMB area".

3.3 Profile of the hubs

All the hubs are situated in and around Pietermaritzburg, in poor communities with little access to organizational resources (conduits for action). All the hubs have had to deal with the question of how best to balance the use of technology (organizational or profit making, from CV's, typing and printing) and think through the implications of these choices. The central question facing hubs today (midway through Phase 2) is how best to translate the skills and experience developed organizationally through their own activities and those associated with Phase 1 into projects which will sustain the organizations into the future.

3.3.1 Sobantu

The Sobantu hub is managed by the Sobantu Environmental Desk, in a smallish African area (close to town) with a long history of political activism. This is the hub that was already computerized before Phase 1, on the basis of the relationship that existed between Sipho Kubheka and INR prior to 1998. The hub has been an integral part of the network (both informal and formal) for some time, and Sipho is now an employee of GREEN. The SED itself is a fairly busy organization (+/- 40 volunteers) and has been active in a number of ways: recycling/ bottle collection (on the basis of which they received a grant in mid-2000 from LIFE), environmental awareness in schools, developing a People's Park, clean-up campaigns (for which they have received small grants from the Council), community workshops etc. It is housed in a secure office in Sobantu which is provided free by the Msunduzi Council.

The organization has at least 10 members who are able to use the computer, and the technology is seen as being an important infrastructure for the organization, both in terms of accessing information and communicating with others on the network, but also as a potential source of income. Some CV's are done, and an application has been sent to the Universal Service Agency to set up a mini telecentre.

Some of the problems faced by the hub include: a situation in which a member of the Development Committee wanted to assume control of the facility (but resolved); dependence on the support of the local councillor for maintaining the space (and expanding it); competing demands of the community (other organizations) and their own work.

From a network point of view, the links remain solid, but these are primarily face-to-face and telephonic. The hub (and the organization itself) are firmly part of the social economy of the network. Like all the organizations involved in Phase 1, the Desk worries about money, and sustainability.

3.3.2 Woodlands

This hub is operated by the Woodlands Environmental Action Desk, and is housed in the Community Support Centre which also acts as a base for other activities. This is the only hub operating in a non-African area. Organizationally, it has never been strong, with a succession of volunteers, and projects, which have never really coalesced. At present there are a number of projects in the pipeline (including a Safe Community Project; a Job and Economic Empowerment Program; a Youth Desk; Women in Action) and ongoing Community Development Seminars. No independently funded projects are operational.

The hub is very much part of the social economy of the network, with strong links to GREEN (who are supporting an ongoing proposal writing effort with the hub). There is a measure of frustration at the lack of community interest and participation.

3.3.3 Willowfontein

The Willowfontein hub is operated by the Willowfontein Youth Development Forum, and is located in a secure building on the premises of an old school in the semi rural Edendale valley. It is an area with a high level of political mobilization, and the Youth Forum is an integral part of this.

Independent support has been generated through a Land Care Project, funded by the Department of Agriculture.

3.3.4 Georgetown

The Georgetown hub is operated by the Edendale YMCA and is located in the new Georgetown library building where the Council provides free office space. This hub was originally located elsewhere, but after a burglary found the present accommodation.

The hub operators are young and are presently employed as field assistants on a Land Care Project which is supported by the Department of Agriculture.

3.3.5 Vulindlela

This hub is presently housed in a private dwelling in a semi-rural area about 40 minutes outside Pietermaritzburg in a politically contested area. The driving force behind the hub has been an elderly community activist involved in a range of activities with local women (collectively known as the Khanyani Agricultural Project). The hub has relocated once, and did have difficulty re-connecting with the network until a wireless telephone line was installed recently.

4. Assessing the objectives of Phase 1

4.1 Establishing GREEN as a central node of the network

It is only possible to answer this question retrospectively, through perceptions from participants, and observation of the organization as it exists today.

Notwithstanding the over reliance on IDRC funding (an issue which effected the transition from Phase1 to Phase 2), GREEN now exists as a secure central node of a network of electronically connected hubs. It has well-situated, secure and convivial premises; a dedicated staff of three people; appropriate management, financial and administrative systems; and appropriate technological support.

Furthermore, GREEN has consolidated itself as the pre-eminent NGO in the environmental arena (with the decline of Earthlife and EJNF).

4.2 Expanding the network into a series of computer equipped, and connected, hubs

At present there are five hubs, all of which have been in existence since the beginning of the project (albeit under different circumstances), located in Woodlands, Vulindlela, Willowfontein, Sobantu and Georgetown. These hubs have the following characteristics:

- All have secure and stable premises with functioning network capability;
- All but one have solid organizational underpinning;
- All have received appropriate training with regard to communicating electronically, and maintaining the infrastructure of the organization;
- All but one act as the offices of organizations which have secured their own funding;
- All play an active role in maintaining the organizational network that is GREEN.

4.3 Ensure that hubs are able to function effectively

While this objective refers primarily to the necessary training required for successful electronic networking (which has been achieved), it raises the more important question regarding the organizational efficacy of the hub, in the light of the overarching commitment to contributing to development and environmental awareness/action.

Without being able to fully evaluate each and every project undertaken by the hub host, it is not that clear whether this aim has been achieved. However, some comments on training can be offered.

4.3.1 Technology Training

- Process: Selected community organizations, familiarised them with the training programme, then selected 2 people per community organization to be trained.
- Each organization selected its own trainees. Selection criteria are unclear.
- Initially 10 people trained - 2 from each hub. Only one of these trainees was not employed elsewhere on the basis of their skills. This may reflect on selection criteria, or a failure to recognise a potential problem (which may have been avoided by building in skills transfer mechanisms from beginning).
- Training happened over 5 days on Saturday mornings.
- Trained in Hardware, MS packages, web processing and using the internet and e-mail
- This formal training was followed by support from Sipho Kubheka. He acknowledges that he did mainly mentoring as the support he gave expanded and supported training in real situations.
- Skills levels amongst hub operators remains uneven (some with limited experience, some new organization members with little training).
- Training manual was supposed to be translated into Zulu but this still hasn't happened.

All things considered, training should probably have happened more slowly, on site, over a longer period with more people involved and at various levels. Material should have been in Zulu to start with.

4.3.2 Environmental Training

- Was successful in terms of its objectives: all the trainees did develop a greater basic understanding of environmental issues.
- Hub operators are definitely more advanced than other GREEN members in terms of understanding, articulating, debating and analysing environmental issues. This is a real indicator and measure of success.
- Training was between 8/1998 and 3/1999, with 13 different sites being visited.
- Training methods appear sound, involving site visits to diverse areas and the use of a variety of learning and delivery methods (lectures, discussions, videos, sessions with other groups from around the country at Valley trust).
- There is no evaluation material available from trainers or learners, which is a problem. This should have been built into the training.
- It is not clear how this training equips hub operators to do broader training work themselves in the light of the objective to broaden understanding in their own communities. There could have been a module on transferring knowledge within the community context. This, along with replication of aspects of the training locally in the 5 areas would have vastly increased the impact of the training.

4.3.3 Management Systems Training

- Basic training in office and operational systems. Managing an office, funds, admin systems.
- Was done through two internally run workshops by GREEN - purpose was to get alignment of systems.
- No material or record of the process is available, and this training appears to have

been fairly informal .

4.4 Endeavor to use the network to the advantage of the community at large (through partnerships with formal and informal stakeholders and ‘representatives’)

There are two central questions that arise when we attempt to evaluate this objective.

Firstly, to assess the extent to which the hub host organization itself has attempted to use the network, which is an organizational and technical question. As can be seen in the section below on the website component of the network, the website per se did not displace more traditional forms of communication across the hub organizations, but did contribute to the identity of the network, and provided the foundation for the receipt of resources (such as training and financial support for connections from GREEN and INR) which provided the necessary infrastructure for other projects. However, with limited funds, the hub hosts were, during the duration of Phase 1, encouraged to carry their own connectivity costs (after a number of hubs ran up large telephone bills).

Secondly, to assess the impact of the hub host organizations on the community at large. This has been a difficult question to answer, as the evaluation has not really provided a platform for analyzing their activities in any detail. However, we did not encounter any perceptions amongst stakeholders that suggest hub host organizations were doing anything but their best. The problem lies in the long linkage chains emanating from the hub host organization. For example, the Georgetown hub hosts are running a Land Care project through the Department of Agriculture involving a group of women. None of these women can be thought of as direct beneficiaries of a communication and information network, although they are clearly benefitting from the linkages with Phase1 (inasmuch as the Land Care project proposals have been facilitated by Duncan Hay at INR).

In terms of the stakeholders, the name given generally to those people or organizations worked with on a regular basis, the emphasis has been on officials within local government structures and service providers. All the individuals contacted within

organizations, such as Local Council officials (planning, waste management etc), Parks Board officials and Umgeni water attest to the important role played by GREEN or hub organizations.

4.5 Developing an effective community-based electronic 'information and communication' model

It is quite clear that there is nothing like a community information network established. There is no right of access 'off the street' to electronic communication systems, and only marginal access for individuals to access information from the internet for example.

Closer examination of the communicative aspects of this objective reveal the following::

4.5.1 Overview of external communication tools

The project had as some of its key specific objectives:

- Representatives of participating organisations transferring their understanding of environment and development issues to the broader community.
- Information on environment and development issues in the Msunduzi River catchment consolidated, accessible and understandable to communities.
- Formulated, tested and validated electronic information and communication model that focuses on community groups and can be applied broadly at local and regional level and that informs a national strategy.

The project used a number of methods to transfer information. Two of the methods used for both internal and external communication and information sharing were the development of a website and the production and distribution of newsletters.

The project successfully managed to put in place both these communication tools during Phase 1, in line with their planned activities and goals.

The extent to which these communication tools assisted in effectively meeting specific objectives of the project is less clear. The key problem that is being

recognised and articulated by the project co-ordinators when reflecting on Phase 1, is around the purpose of information sharing. The following questions were not effectively answered at the outset:

- What kinds of information needs to be shared?
- Who does particular information need to be shared with?
- What is the purpose of sharing that information with a particular target group?
- What method would be most appropriate for sharing specific information, with a specific group, for a specific purpose?

The project did share information about its work, about environmental and development issues and about networking with a range of target audiences through a range of methods, yet the potential of each method was not fully utilised. The result of this has been that these methods have not been effectively reviewed, developed and restructured into more appropriate tools in the later Phases of the project. It has been difficult for the project to do this as the reason for each method used having limited effect, was not immediately clear.

4.5.2 The Website as a communication tool

The development of a website, or cluster of websites, for the project was a fundamental part of Phase 1. By the end of the project a website at www.duzi.co.za had been created which included linked pages of each of the 5 operational hubs, a project information page, and links to the partner organisation's websites.

This was a substantial achievement given the lack of infrastructure and skills which existed at the outset of the project. It is difficult to assess the extent to which the website has been effective in achieving its aim as no clear purpose was initially identified within the project objectives. The project identified the need to use a website as a communication tool from the outset, and set about getting the site up and running. It is only in retrospect that the project co-ordinators are beginning to question

what it was that they were attempting to achieve by doing this.

The purpose of the website

What is unclear about the development of the website is to which project objective it related. The project co-ordinators have differing impressions as to why the website was initially created, what its purpose was, and therefore whether it has been an effective communication tool or not. It seems that there was a general acceptance that using a website to share information was the only clear and common understanding of why it should be developed. The reasons given by the project co-ordinators for the establishment of the website were as follows:

- It would improve communication thereby supporting the improvement of the environment of the catchment area.
- In generating information it would develop skills.
- It was an important way to view each other's information.
- It would create a sense of pride and identity for the hubs.
- Communication through the web had not been done before around these issues so it would be unique.
- It was merely one of a range of communication tools being used by the project.

There was no initial discussion around who the target audience of the website would be, and what purpose posting information would have. There was an assumption, which was not necessarily even articulated, that hubs should post information about their work which would be useful to the other hubs in the project, similar organisations, and any interested browsers globally.

The process of development

In developing the website, the project team attempted to follow a thorough planning process. Each hub met individually to decide what information should be posted on

their site. There was discussion around branding and creating a clear individual identity for each hub, which related to the issue of catchment management which concerned the hub.

This process worked well with the results being that each hub had a clear idea of what they wanted their site to look like and what information it should contain. The discussions around content of the sites centred around what information they had available and what it was that they wanted to share with the other hubs. There was limited, if any, discussion about who would be viewing their sites, and why particular information was important to share.

Most of the hubs initially wanted their sites to contain photographs of the team along with other information. This indicates their need to use the website to establish their own identities as organisations. Problems with download time resulted in web pages containing only text at the end of the day.

The website design

The website has a straightforward design. The homepage contains a logo and links to each of the 5 hub pages, a link on education and training and a link called research activities. The home page is visually pleasing, although it does not give an immediate sense of what the project is about and where it is located, through visual images and design. A viewer would need to access each of the links in order to get basic information about the project. The design of the web site is the result of the confusion around who the site is aimed at and for what purpose. The accessibility of the information is affected in that it is not immediately clear where a viewer could find information which they may be looking for.

Hub pages

The hub pages each have a strong sense of individuality, both in design and in

content. The pages for the Woodlands, Edendale and Vulindlela hubs are designed around the projects which are being undertaken by the hubs. They give an easy-to-read background and project information. The Woodlands site is particularly effective in providing a short, easy to read background to where they are located, what they do and why they do it.

The pages for Willowfontein and Sobantu are less accessible as they contain detailed workshop reports which are clearly internal organisational documents.

Background and project information pages

These pages aim to provide project information, and a context to the work of the Msunduzi Community Network, Green and the INR. The background and project information pages are the least accessible and well-organised links on the web site. The text is dense, too long and difficult to read. This, again, is probably a result of the lack of clarity as to the purpose of the site. Detailed, useful information has been provided, but little attention has been given to how to organise, write and present that information in a way that a range of viewers would gain the most from it.

Monitoring, updating and reviewing the website

The website was only developed towards the end of Phase 1, with the result that updating and a monitoring did not occur as a part of Phase 1.

The success of the web site as a communication tool

The project co-ordinators view the key successes of the website development process as being:

- A 'presence' of the project on the internet was established.
- A sense of identity and pride was created within the hub teams

- Accessing their own, and other hub, websites regularly supported the training process of hub staff in that it familiarised staff with using the internet.
- Staff saw that using the internet as an information sharing tool was possible.

These successes are limited. What was not achieved within Phase 1 was:

- the use of the internet as a stand alone communication tool. Networking between the hubs was still reliant on face to face and paper based communication.
- an information resource which met the information, education and networking needs of a range of target audiences. The information posted on the site was not organised in a way which clearly fulfilled an internal or external project information purpose, nor a more general community education and marketing purpose.
- an effective mechanism for the review, development and maintenance of the web site as the project developed.

The staff member responsible for the website development reflected in retrospect, that the website should only have been developed in Phase 2 of the project, once organisational communication mechanisms were already established using more familiar methods. This would have allowed the organisation to work out what information they needed to share and with whom, before they designed a tool using a new medium to do this information sharing.

4.5.3 Publications

The project set out to produce an external newsletter in each quarter of Phase 1. During the Phase, two publications were produced, the first in April/May 1999, and the second in September/October 1999. Although the second publication was distributed after the end of the Phase 1 time frame, the content and production process was a product of Phase 1.

The purpose of the newsletters was to:

- Serve as a backup to other methods of communication and networking being used by the project.
- Provide information internally as to what was happening in the other hubs.
- Provide information about the project and about environmental and catchment issues to the community in general, institutions, researchers and other organisations and interested people.

This was an ambitious aim in that the information needs , as well as the readability requirements of the various target audiences was vastly different.

About 60 copies of each newsletter were produced for distribution. This is a small print run for publications with a wide target audience.

Content

The first newsletter, produced in April/May 1999, has a strong project focus. It covers an introduction to the Msunduzi Catchment Community Communication Project and brief information about the organisations operating in Sobantu, Woodlands, Khanyisani, Edendale and Willowfontein, as well as about the Sananezwe telecentre. This information is clear, informative and gives a good overview of the work of the project.

In addition to the project information, the newsletter also carries two information/education pieces carried by newspapers on flooding. The first story is a news story on the devastating floods in the Msunduzi area. The second is a story about problems being experienced with insurance claims as a result of the flooding. While these news stories add information about flooding issues in the area, their inclusion in the newsletter is confusing as there is no mediation or contextualising of the information. The stories are difficult to read and to understand.

The second newsletter, produced in September/October 1999, has a much stronger educational focus. There is a good balance between broad information about the project and why it was formed, and useful information around environmental education, water sources and information and communication technology. An accessible and informative staff profile page has also been included.

Language, readability and design

The newsletter use a mix of English and Zulu. All of the project information in the first newsletter is in Zulu. The second newsletter is written in English, with one story written in Zulu. The project co-ordinator felt that the use of Zulu in the first newsletter was effective in making the newsletter more accessible to larger numbers of people.

The writing style used in both the publications is accessible, aimed at drawing the reader in and developing understanding, with the exception of the news stories in newsletter one.

The publications have a strong identity created through the logo, the running headers and through the graphics used. The graphics are well placed within the design to support the information contained in the text.

They are both, however quite text heavy, and may be fairly daunting reading for sectors of the target audience.

Effectiveness of the newsletters as a communication tool

The newsletters are a substantial achievement. They were successful in that:

- they were produced almost entirely in-house.
- they provide relevant and useful information in print around issues which would not be easily accessible to the target audience through other means,

- they provide a good sense of the project and catchment issues through visual material, text and profiles.

The factors which prevented the newsletters meeting the objective well were:

- The publications had a broad target audience, requiring different information as well as format. The publications attempted to meet too many needs within four pages.
- The language choice and level, design and writing style was not entirely appropriate to meet the needs of the broader community in some of the areas where literacy levels are low.

With a low print run, the newsletter has not achieved its primary purpose of widely sharing information, although it has contributed to a sense of purpose amongst the participants of the project.

5. Conclusions

Crucial issues to note that have emerged from the evaluation:

- ▶ The social economy of the network (the relations amongst and between hubs and the central node, GREEN) has remained intact despite the electronic connectivity being interrupted from time to time;
- ▶ The social economy of the network owes much to the dedication of the GREEN animators, and its connection to a broad range of organizations which go beyond purely environmental issues;
- ▶ The social economy of the network still relies heavily on face-to-face interaction, as does the transfer of skills (through the mobility of significant individuals involved with GREEN);
- ▶ The nature of the communities within which the hubs are situated has created a number of problems;
- ▶ The tensions generated between the imperative of hub sustainability and the goal of information sharing have created some uncertainty with regards to the primary focus of organizations;
- ▶ The hubs have not really provided a public service, and consequently have not developed into public access points for information sharing;
- ▶ Stakeholders have provided favorable reports on the network, although these are often related to the specific organizations responsible for hubs;
- ▶ The development of skills has resulted in some losses to the network, although this has not affected the operation of hubs per se;

- ▶ There have been a number of problems associated with the specific communicative aspect of the project (the website, training for use of internet, publications);
- ▶ There have been a number of problems associated with managing the connectivity (excessive phone bills and ISP costs).

6. Implications for Phase 2

On completion of Phase 1 there was a hiatus of about six months before funding for Phase 2 came through. Both GREEN and INR felt that this hiatus created a number of problems, although it is not clear how this situation came about. During this period the network effectively ceased to function, debts were incurred, and the momentum created in Phase 1 was lost. People had to find other ways to live.

Phase 2 also saw a change in the nature of the collaboration between INR and GREEN. INR took on the responsibility for training, with GREEN taking more responsibility for the management of the network. This shift has not been easy as the tension between sustaining the network and building capacity, both essential ingredients for success, were driven farther apart.

The experience of having to rebuild the network (not as a social entity, but as a collection of functioning hubs) has also been the impetus to develop strategies for the sustainability of individual hubs, and it is during Phase 2 that we see the emergence of independently funded projects associated with organizations responsible for hubs (as in the Land Care projects, LIFE project) and the growing emphasis on generating funds (preparation of business plans, fund-raising training and the setting up of a training centre in GREEN itself).

This scenario exacerbates some of the earlier tensions: as people in the hubs are increasingly under pressure to find alternative sources of funding, so too their commitment to developing the network with the primary aim of creating an environmental network with community access is also under pressure.

7. Lessons learned

7.1 Participants

The major stumbling block to assessing learning amongst participants in the project is that of perspective. There is no coherent measure of how much the various hub operators have really learned, both in terms of the technology and in terms of application. A thorough and careful audit of skills should have been conducted early on, and monitored throughout. This is not simply a question of skills however, but of the interest and exploration that individuals express and display. Have they become real intermediaries and information seekers, and do they know what to do with information and how it may be useful to somebody else? There is no doubt that some individuals have good skills, but are they transferable?

Clearly, the active members of GREEN have become multi-skilled, and act as ‘infomediaries’, and have become indispensable to the network as a whole as ‘problem solvers’ and ‘intelligence dispensers’. They have ideas and actively seek to make things happen.

However this is not an automatic result of the network, but strongly dependent on commitment and motivation. As the hub organizations become drawn into the mire of sustainability, and the preparation of proposals and activities associated with the projects they establish, this flexibility and enthusiasm for the technology may be diluted. But not always.

It is important that such people remain close to the network, and are not simply ‘accessed’ from time to time when a job needs doing. The whole ICT phenomenon, in the context of development, bears testimony to this. While it may be unavoidable to require the services of multi-skilled individuals, the real question is: How can these people be more systematically enrolled into the social economy of the network? I

believe that the partnership between GREEN and INR was appropriate to kick-start the project, but will eventually tail off as their different trajectories take them in different directions.

7.2 Information and communication

Phase 1 established the infrastructure of the network as a 'communicative community', adding a new dimension to the existing social network. The addition of email in particular, provided new contact opportunities, but brought with it new challenges (mainly costs, but also new forms of self discipline). The web pages too provided a broader canvas for the network, but created a far larger hurdle: how to mesh the possibilities inherent in the new accessibility of information with both the foundations of the project (the flood crisis of 1995) and the diversity of interests inherent in a network rooted in quite different communities, with different organizational capabilities.

The most obvious success in this regard is the status of having an electronic network up and running, both from the point of view of the identity of the network and its position vis a vis local organizations (both formal and informal). There is a sense in which having a web page was enough. The problem of making the internet really useful has waxed and waned, but the capacity has always been a strength of the network.

It is also clear that the connectivity also reconfigured the hub organizations with reference to other NGO's and CBO's, adding something to the sector as a whole, which, in a period of declining civil society momentum, is an important outcome.

Good examples of the usefulness of the internet access have been provided, but they tend to be associated with a clarity of organizational purpose rather than a general meeting of minds (the issue of information on recycling for example). Some strong partnerships have developed, but only when a clarity on 'need' has been established.

Appendix

Interviews conducted with:

Sandile Ndawonde
Duncan Hay
Sipho Kubheka
Nhlanhla Sihlope
Kwazi Mngadi
Busi Mbokazi
Phumlani Nene
Khulekane Ndawonde
Mandla Makhaye
Ernest Simpson
Mrs Elder Radebe
Welile Hlongwa
Thulisile Ngcobo
Phumlani Dlamini
Kate Wild
Wardie Leppan

Observations and site visits:

GREEN (five visits)
Sobantu hub (three visits)
Woodlands hub (three visits)
Georgetown hub (three visits)
Willowfontein (two visits)

Vulindlela (one visit)

Stakeholders:

Umgeni Water

Msunduzi TLC

- Planning

- Waste management

- Parks Dept

Natal Museum

Natal Society Library

Togan Computers

Keep Maritzburg Clean Assoc

Members of various NGO's, and CBO's in the Pmb area.